

CHAPTER 4: PARKS & RECREATION

“(I would like to see) facilities that draw people to participate in enjoyment of community and environment – a diversity of parks, bike paths for enjoyment and connectivity. (For example,) kids biking from Evergreen to skate park? Cultural facilities – performance arts.”

Evergreen Area Resident, 12/12/05

“All dens(ely) developed areas, like subdivisions, malls & shopping centers, that aren’t on city services should be required to have water & wastewater treatment rules & regs. (We) need better roads. Money would be better spent on roads (and) schools than on parks, bike paths, lighting & non-necessity items. Focus on infrastructure more than dressing.”

Olney Resident, 11/28/05

Introduction

Public parks, trails, and recreation offer countless values to Flathead County residents and visitors. Public parks, trails, and open space provide the opportunity to be physically active and fit. Having close-to-home access to quality places to recreate is one of the most important factors determining whether people will be active and stay that way.

Goal

- G.17 To accelerate the development process for park, trail, and open space infrastructure to meet the challenges of community growth and development.

Policies

- P.17.1 Acquisition of park and leisure facility sites should occur now to serve the future needs of the county, particularly water-based parks which provide public access to lakes, rivers and streams.
- P.17.2 With the exception of water based parks, subdivision park requirements should be used to create and/or fund dedicated park sites of optimal size of no less than five acres to accommodate operation and maintenance costs.
- P.17.3 Existing parks and recreational facilities should be operated and maintained in a quality condition for use by the general public.
- P.17.4 Develop strategies to fund, operate, and maintain new parks and recreational facilities.

- P.17.5 Prepare a comprehensive Parks and Recreation Master Plan to guide the expansion of the park system to meet the needs and expectations of the growing public.

Goal

- G.18 To create partnerships with common interest groups and the people within our community.

Policies

- P.18.1 Encourage parks, planning, and development coordination with other local jurisdictions, state, and federal agencies.
- P.18.2 Participate with developing partnerships, community civic groups and organizations, private sector building and development industry, and others interested in parks and recreation activities.

Goal

- G.19 Maintain or increase the current level of service for park facilities and recreation services in Flathead County relative to population growth and public demands and expectations.

Policies

- P.19.1 Provide new lands and indoor/outdoor recreation and park facilities to keep pace with expanding population and demand.
- P.19.2 Maintain level of recreation services by providing innovative programs geared towards a diverse demographic of county residents (children, adults, seniors, etc.).

PART 1: Community Benefits of Parks and Recreation (see Goals 17 and 18)

The economic benefits of parks and recreation areas are numerous. One of the more significant benefits is the increase in value of private lands adjacent to or near protected public parks, trails, or open space. Close proximity of parks to residential areas leads to increased land values and safer walks for children and adults to the park and back. Often, quality parks and recreation areas are an important consideration of businesses looking at expansion or relocation. Parks and recreation areas improve the quality of the living environment and make communities livable and desirable for businesses and homeowners.

Parks, trails, and open spaces provide vital green space in the fast growing landscape. They provide vegetative and recreational area and can be used to reduce the impacts of

development sprawl. These areas are also instrumental in providing access to rivers, lakes, and adjoining public lands. Just as importantly parks, trails, and open space maintain open view-sheds, and provide groundwater recharge areas, floodplain protection, natural sound barriers, weed buffers and filter pollutants from the air. Parks keep the living environment healthy.

Parks, trails, and open spaces facilitate social interactions for individuals, families, civic groups, and others. These areas are critical to maintaining community cohesion and pride. Parks allow for meeting places where the community can develop social ties and bonds. Leisure activity in parks can reduce stress and enhance a sense of wellness. People go to parks, use trails, or experience open space to reinvigorate themselves and to decrease the anxieties of daily life.

Community recreation services and programs encourage organized, structure, and enjoyable activities for people of all ages. The Department of Parks and Recreation offers organized recreation programs for youth and adults. Programs currently offered for youth include: outdoor flag football, volleyball and t-ball at various locations throughout the county. Adult programs include: basketball, flag football, and softball. The Conrad Sports Complex currently services over 100 softball teams.

PART 2: Flathead County Parks

Existing Characteristics

The growing popularity and demand for parks and recreational opportunities are in proportion to the dynamic growth and development of Flathead County. During the growth policy public meetings held throughout Flathead County in November and December of 2005 and January of 2006, numerous residents cited increased and improved parks and recreation services as desirable goals for the future of the county (see Appendix B: Public Involvement Summary). A growing public desires greater opportunities for passive and organized recreation programming. Greater access to water-based recreation is also a growing priority. The Department of Parks and Recreation is currently responsible for the development, operation, and maintenance of a wide range and variety of parks and recreation facilities. Although the existing park and recreation system offers recreational opportunities for individuals, families, and group users, it must also be dynamic to meet changing public needs and desires.

The department currently maintains 37 park and recreation facilities and one cemetery totaling approximately 383 acres. The facilities can be categorized by function. Of the 37 park sites, 20 are land-based parks, 14 sites are water-based parks, and four are special use parks. Tables 4.1, 4.2, and 4.3 list the parks in each category.

Land-based parks account for 97 acres (see Table 4.1). Land-based parks range from 1/3 of an acre to 24 acres with an average area of just under five acres. Within these parks there are 20 ball fields, one volleyball court, four basketball courts, multi-purpose fields and most offer picnic area and child playgrounds.

Table 4.1
Existing Land-Based Parks and Recreation Facilities

Park	Acres	Facilities
Aero Lane Park	1.0	Ball field
Ben Williams Park	5.0	Volleyball/picnic/playground
Carlyle Johnson Park	14.0	Ball fields/soccer/playground/picnic
Conrad Sports Complex	15.0	Ball fields/basketball/playground/picnic
Country Estates Park	3.7	Grass field
Evergreen Lions Park	3.4	Ball field/basketball/picnic/playground
Green Acres Park	1.5	Picnic/playground
Happy Valley Park	24.0	Playground
Hillcrest Park	7.0	Ball fields/multi-use fields/playground
Hilltop Terrace Park	1.9	Picnic/playground
Kokanee Bend Park	4.2	Ball field/picnic/playground/horseshoe
Lake Hills Park	4.1	Not developed
Martin City Park	1.6	Ball field/playground/picnic
Meadow Hills Park	2.9	Picnic/playground
Mission Village Overlook Park	1.6	Picnic/playground
North Haven Park	1.1	Picnic/playground
Potoczny-Bigfork Park	0.3	Grass field
Silver Shadow Park	1.0	Ball field/playground/picnic
Sliter Park	2.0	Picnic/playground/stage
Sunrise Terrace Park	2.2	Playground/picnic

Source: Flathead County Parks and Recreation

There are 14 water-based parks, covering 163 acres, offering access to lakes and rivers via boat ramps, docks, and fishing (see Table 4.2). These water front public access areas are especially important due to the increasing private shoreline development and the increasing popularity of water-based recreation. The average size of water based parks is about 12 acres, although most of the Leisure Island Park is undeveloped and in a natural state. Discounting the Leisure Island Park natural area the average size of a water-based park is close to two acres. These water based facilities offer access to three rivers and six lakes. Map 4.1 shows the location of existing park and leisure facilities.

Table 4.2
Existing Water-Based Parks and Recreation Facilities

Park	Acres	Facilities
Bigfork Boat Dock Park	--	Benches/picnic (Swan River)
Blankenship/Max Edgar Park	8.3	Boat ramp (Echo Lake)
Blue Grouse Park	4.3	Boat ramp/dock/picnic (Little Bitterroot Lake)
Flathead River Ranchettes Park	2.7	Boat ramp/picnic (Flathead River)
Foys Lake Park	--	Boat ramp/dock/swim area/picnic (Foys Lake)
Kelsey/Cummings Dam Park	1.2	Boat ramp/picnic (Little Bitterroot Lake)
Kings Loop Park	2.0	Fishing Access (Whitefish River)
Lakeside – Adams Park	--	Boat ramp (Flathead Lake)
Lakeside – Bierney Creek Park	--	Boat ramp (Flathead Lake)
Lazy Bay Park	3.2	Dock (Whitefish Lake)
Leisure Island Park	137.2	Boat ramp/picnic (Flathead River)
Little Bitterroot Lake Park	1.2	Lake access (Little Bitterroot Lake)
Somers Swimming Park	2.0	Swim area/picnic (Flathead Lake)
Whitefish Boat Park	0.5	Boat dock/picnic (Whitefish Lake)

Source: Flathead County Parks and Recreation

Four special use facilities account for 123 acres (see Table 4.3). Special use facilities are dedicated for specific or single-purpose recreational activities and serve a limited population, such as the Herron Equestrian Park. Herron Equestrian Park also offers camping, biking cross-country skiing, rugby and other multi-purpose organized activities. The Demersville Cemetery is provided maintenance only.

Table 4.3
Existing Special Use Parks

Park	Acres	Facilities
Demersville Cemetery	--	Cemetery/Historic Site
Foys Community Center	2.0	Community center building
Herron Equestrian Park	118.0	Horse stalls/dressage/picnic/x-country skiing
Hungry Horse Island Park	3.3	Monuments

Source: Flathead County Parks and Recreation

Administration of Parks and Recreation

Parks and recreation services in Flathead County are overseen by the Flathead County Parks Board. The board was re-established in 1997 and is comprised of five members. These members are appointed by the Flathead County Board of Commissioners to serve three year terms. The Board has the general responsibility for the administration of the Department of Parks and Recreation and the authority to employ the department director.

The board also employs staff to both program recreation as well as operate and maintain facilities. The Parks Board also can acquire land needed for parks and recreation facilities. These sites can be in incorporated cities as well as in the unincorporated areas of Flathead County.

PART 3: State and Federal Recreation Areas (see Goal 1 in Chapter 2: Land Uses)

Within Flathead County there are numerous parks and recreation areas under federal and state management. These facilities offer a wide diversity and outstanding all-season outdoor recreational amenities for all county residents. Major recreational facilities and administering agencies are listed in Table 4.4.

Table 4.4
Federal & State Recreation Areas

Facility	Area	Management Agency
Glacier Nat'l Park	635,214	US National Park Service
Flathead National Forest	1,875,545	US Forest Service
Kootenai, Lewis and Clark and Lolo National Forests	115,390 (total acreage)	US Forest Service
Lost Trails National Wildlife Refuge	7,885	US Fish & Wildlife
Swan River National Wildlife Refuge	1,568	US Fish & Wildlife
Smith Lake Waterfowl Production Area	5,189	US Fish & Wildlife
Wayfarers State Park	67	Montana Fish, Wildlife, Parks
Whitefish Lake State Park	11	Montana Fish, Wildlife, Parks
Whitefish State Trust Lands	13,000	Montana Fish, Wildlife, Parks

Source: Montana Natural Resource Information System

The primary distinction between federal and state recreation areas and county recreation areas is programming. Parks under county administration offer active organized sport activities (e.g. softball, volleyball, soccer and football, etc.) while federal and state lands promote unique outdoor activities such as camping, hiking, fishing and hunting. The importance of federal and state lands for recreation is tied to the custom and culture of Montana residents and visitors for outdoor activities. Flathead County seeks to provide recreational opportunities that are an alternative to activities found on federal and state lands as well as safeguard public access to public lands and water bodies.

PART 4: Level of Service (see Goal 19)

Level of service is one tool used to baseline existing parks and recreational infrastructure relative to population. Flathead County's population in 2004 was estimated to be slightly less than 82,000. The population of the unincorporated area of the county was estimated at 53,505. Based on the unincorporated population the county offers approximately 7.2 acres of total recreational areas per 1,000 residents. Park space per 1,000 population is shown on Table 4.5 for each of the park types.

Table 4.5
Park Space Level of Service

Park	Number	Acres	Average Size	AC/1,000 population
Land-Based	20	97	5	1.8
Water-Based	14	163 ¹	12 ²	3.0
Special Use	3	123	41	2.3
Overall	37	383	10	7.2

Source: Flathead County Parks and Recreation

Typically, level of service calculations are used to monitor performance in implementing park and recreation service delivery and infrastructure goals. Level of service goals are normally associated with comprehensive park master plans. Flathead County does not currently have a comprehensive parks and recreation master plan and therefore cannot anticipate future public needs.

Resident needs in 2006 dictate a need to provide organized sports and other recreational activities and services. Softball and youth soccer are popular and highly visible activities, with more than 100 teams competing for space at the Conrad Sports Complex. Organized recreation for youth is also in demand. More specialized types of recreation such as skateboard parks and swimming are also growing in popularity. The County provides organized recreational programs to more than 10,000 residents each year. At the present time the county does not have a recreation center for basketball and other indoor recreation activities.

Using the level of service tool to identify future park space needs can predict gaps in service delivery. Using countywide trends, which includes incorporated city populations the overall population is expected to continue to grow by about 20% per decade over the next 20 years to a resident population of approximately 112,000. The ratio of overall county to unincorporated populations would result in approximately 74,190 within the unincorporated area by 2025.

¹ Approximately 137 acres of this total comes from one park (Leisure Island Park) that is primarily undeveloped.

² This average is heavily skewed by the large size of Leisure Island Park (137 acres).

Likewise, it can be expected that organized recreation programming will increase in relation to population growth. The current 10,000 residents served through recreational programming in 2005 will increase to about 14,000 by 2025. Park space needs will need to be analyzed based on long term goals for park system expansion and service delivery. Decisions will need to be made on priorities for passive versus active and organized programming.

If no additions to the park system are realized over the next 20 years, the park space will fall from a current level of 7.2 acres per 1,000 population to 5.2 acres per 1,000 residents. The relative decreases in level of service and new park space needed to maintain the current level of service are shown in Table 4.6.

Table 4.6
Park Space Projections

Park Type	Acres	Current Acreage per 1,000 Pop.	Acreage per 1,000 Pop. w/o new facilities 2025	Additional acres needed to maintain current acreage p
Land-based	97	1.9	1.3	38
Water-based	163	3.0	2.2	57
Special Use	123	2.3	1.7	48
Overall	383	7.2	5.2	143

In order to maintain the current level of service an additional 143 acres of new parks would need to be added to the park system. This would include an additional 38 acres for land based parks, 57 acres of water based parks, and 48 acres of new special use facilities. It is essential that the park and recreation system and programs are viewed in a comprehensive fashion, that all component are considered in development and on-going management. If Flathead County anticipates providing meaningful park and recreation services to a growing public, it is essential to develop appropriate sites, manage developed parks in a quality condition and facilitate recreational programming.